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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS QUESTION THE RESET

Classified By: DCM Eric Rubin for reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: A group of civil society leaders told Senior Russia NSC Director Michael McFaul January 14 that they were disappointed with the perceived U.S. retreat on support of human rights in Russia. While they cautioned against returning to what they called the "aggressive" style of the Bush Administration, the activists requested more public criticism of the GOR's human rights transgressions. McFaul, however, pointed to an extensive record of public statements and private interventions by Administration officials, including the President. The activists also offered ideas for a new strategy of rights promotion, including isolating Kadyrov by improving relations with Presidents of other North Caucasus Republics. The activists expressed doubt that anything useful could take place in the Bilateral Presidential Commission Civil Society Working Group as long as Vladislav Surkov was involved, and suggested that independent Russian NGOs be allowed to help shape the discussion. McFaul emphasized that the Civil Society Working Group was only one small part of a much broader approach to fostering development of civil society and promoting democracy and human rights in Russia. End Summary.

12. (C) In a frank exchange at the Embassy on January 14, a group of Russian civil society leaders told Senior Russia NSC Director Michael McFaul of their disappointment with what they perceive as a U.S. retreat on support of human rights in Russia. Svetlana Gannushkina of the NGO Civil Assistance (who also works with Memorial and is a member of President Medvedev's Council on Human Rights) said that the human rights situation in Russia had sharply deteriorated in the past year, especially in the North Caucasus, where people are "trembling" with a fear that approaches that of Stalin's times. She insinuated that the "reset" in U.S.-Russia relations was stifling activists' ability to speak out on abuses, asserting that after the murder of Chechen activist Natalya Estemirova in July, Kadyrov "got the message" that no one was going to protest, which led him to conclude that he had carte blanche for more murders. According to Gannushkina, this in turn led to further killings, such as the shooting of activists Zarema Sadulayeva and Alik Dzhabrailov in August. (Note: The NSC, State Department, and Ambassador Beyrle all issued strong statements condemning the Estemirova killing soon after her body had been found. End Note.)

13. (C) When McFaul asked Gannushkina if she was implying that the "reset" meant a lack of understanding of the human rights situation on the part of the U.S., Gannushkina answered that "we don't see a reaction" to these abuses. McFaul refuted this point, noting the frequent official U.S. statements responding to such incidents. Gannushkina said that meetings addressing civil society concerns must take place with all four sides at the table, i.e. government and NGO representatives from both countries. McFaul pointed out that the U.S. attempted just such a meeting in July, only to have the GOR decide not to participate, adding that in the end, it is up to Russian activists to build a relationship with the

GOR. Lyudmila Alekseyeva of the Moscow Helsinki Group agreed, saying: "We talk to Medvedev on the Presidential Council; why do we need to involve the Americans in this?"

14. (C) Alekseyeva told McFaul that, much as she appreciated the NSC statement protesting her brief detention at a New Year's Eve Dissenters' March (while dressed as Snegurochka, a Russian Christmas snowmaiden), there are more significant problems than "four hours of detention of one old lady," and the U.S. should not "stand by" as the other, more significant atrocities, continue to take place in the country. According to Alekseyeva, freedom of assembly is under siege in a widespread sense, due to the GOR's paranoia about the possibility of an Orange Revolution in Russia.

Turn up the heat, but don't be another Bush

15. (C) Yuriy Dzhibladze of the Center for Human Rights and Democracy told McFaul that Russian human rights activists hear what Washington is saying, but that he and other activists were skeptical regarding U.S. promises of continued support, and that the public U.S. statements after the death of Estemirova were "not enough." Dzhibladze said that two years ago, when U.S. officials asked his advice, he told them to tone down their criticism of the GOR, because their style was overly confrontational, and because anti-Americanism was rife among Russian officialdom (as well as in society as a whole). Dzhibladze now felt that the U.S. should strengthen its criticism, "not to become aggressive like Bush," but to make sure that human rights issues remain prominent on the agenda in bilateral relations. Acknowledging that the U.S.

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must strike a "delicate balance" between public criticism and private engagement, Dzhibladze nonetheless asserted that, as a "partner" of Russia, the U.S. "has the right to demand reforms" in exchange for trade or other concessions the U.S. might make to Russia. Dzhibladze also asked for more frequent opportunities to confer with U.S. officials.

16. (C) In response to McFaul's request for some creative ideas for a more effective strategy of human rights promotion, Memorial Human Rights Center board member and internet-based Caucasian Knot editor Grigoriy Shvedov noted that mere "scolding" was insufficient, and suggested that the U.S. form a more thorough partnership with local NGOs that go beyond mere financial support. Improving the life of average people in the North Caucasus would go a long way toward defusing the situation, he said. Lev Ponomarev of the NGO For Human Rights said that Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov should be treated as an international persona non grata who runs a "totalitarian regime." Alekseyeva suggested sending a delegation to visit Ingush President Yanus-Bek Yevkurov, who "at least is trying." Such a visit could contrast with the shunning of Kadyrov, especially if combined with visits to other republics in the North Caucasus. (Note: The USAID Mission Director visited Ingushetiya December 16, and had constructive talks with Yevkurov's Prime Minister, Aleksey Vorobyev. End Note.) Ponomarev proposed holding an international conference on the North Caucasus, bringing in experts on the region to pool knowledge and resources. He added that the GOR has already created a working group on the North Caucasus, including human rights defenders within the GOR, such as Ella Pamfilova of the President's Human Rights Council, Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin, and Public Chamber member Nikolay Svanidze.

Concerns on the BPC

17. (C) Dzhibladze asked McFaul about the status of the Bilateral Presidential Commission (BPC) Civil Society Working Group. McFaul assured him that the U.S. has no plans to capitulate to Vladislav Surkov, Medvedev's First Deputy Chief of Staff, and head of the Russian side of the Civil Society

Working Group. (Note: As the reported architect of Russia's notion of "sovereign democracy," Surkov is the bete noire of the Russian human rights community. End note.) However, McFaul did note that it is not the business of the U.S. to dictate to the Russian side which NGOs should participate in the planned January 27 meeting of the BPC in Washington. Activists at the meeting differed regarding the usefulness of the planned topics of discussion, civil society's role in anti-corruption efforts, and protection of children from trafficking in persons and child pornography. Alekseyeva called the latter topic a "kasha theme" (i.e., feel-good pablum allowing the GOR to sidestep any hard questions about civil society), while Ponomarev asserted that children's orphanages in Russia currently constitute an "intellectual genocide," and hence it would be a topic worth exploring.

18. (C) McFaul explained that he envisioned that the Civil Society Working Group meeting would involve both a government-to-government session and a parallel NGO-NGO session, after which the NGO representatives would speak to the Commission. Dzhibladze suggested allowing the NGOs to create their own agenda for their meeting, and McFaul told him that this idea had President Obama's personal backing. While doubting the utility of the Working Group, given Surkov's agenda, Dzhibladze at the same time noted that joint work against corruption could be a way to force the GOR to address broader civil society issues, despite its plans to sweep such issues under the rug.

Comment

19. (C) From the critical comments by civil society activists, many of them are unaware of the contours of the Administration's approach to human rights and its record of public statements and speeches. We need to do a much better job of explaining publicly and, in particular, to Russian civil society actors, the "reset" and our overall approach to promoting human rights and democracy in Russia.
Beyrle